

Reconciling Opposites: Innocence and Experience in David Malouf's *Fly Away Peter*.

Chitra Thrivikraman Nair

Assistant Professor of English

M.A, B.Ed, UGC-NET Ph.D.*

Government Arts College

Trivandrum

Abstract

The 20th century had witnessed two devastating wars, and mankind has suffered the effects unleashed by the two wars. It is a well-acknowledged fact that the entire world was affected by the effects of the First World War, considered to be one of the largest wars in history. The psychological and physical wounds inflicted upon mankind by the disastrous consequences of the War have provided many writers with the material for their literary works. As literature, fiction in particular, is considered an effective medium to portray the evil effects of war on mankind; the writers of the postcolonial era have resorted to express their anti-war sentiments through their works. David Malouf, a prominent Australian writer of the contemporary times, has essayed to expose his views against wars, and justify his concern for his fellow beings. The present article seeks to examine Malouf's *Fly Away Peter* as a sincere exploration of a man's physical and spiritual journey from innocence to experience through his move from Australia to Europe when he joins up to fight in the first World War. In this sense, the novel not only turns out to be story of an individual, but also casts light on the effects of the First World War on the Australian society. The novel also attests to Malouf's superb ability to blend history and fictional imagination, and also stands out as a significant contribution towards understanding Australian War experience.

Introduction

In the 20th century, hailed as a century of war, no part of the world is left untouched by the bitter experiences of war. Australia too is no exception to this, for the country was involved

in the activities of the First World War. Following Britain's declaration of War on Germany on 4 August, 1914, Australia and other countries under the British Empire had no other option, but to support the British Empire. Given the predominantly British heritage of most Australians at the time, the War received considerable support from all parts of the Continent, and large numbers of young Australians were reported to have enlisted themselves in the armed services.

Most of the war literature produced in the post-war era tends to focus on the impact of war on individuals, as on the socio-political implications of war, thus arousing anti-war sentiments in the minds of the public, and thereby creating a strong and stiff opposition to the concept of war itself. As a voluminous writer, Malouf's genius reveals itself in his literary output where he has experimented with every theme that came his way, and it is, therefore, natural for Malouf to turn his attention to the historical event of war. The devastating effects of war on the Australian society have often provided him with the intellectual sustenance and nourishment for his works. By taking recourse to the theory of literary realism as can be traced back to nineteenth-century French literature, *Fly Away Peter* can be read as a truly authentic depiction of the war activities and experiences of the characters caught in the vortex of the distressing experiences unleashed by the war. Instead of a romanticising or glorifying war, Malouf has portrayed the deplorable human condition through the paradigm of the realities of war in the Australian social context.

Born in Brisbane in 1934, David Malouf is the second generation of a Lebanese Christian family that came to Australia in the 1880s. Following the civil war between the Muslims and the Christian in his native Lebanon under the rule of the Turks, Malouf's grandfather migrated to Australia primarily to evade the compulsory military service. Malouf's mother of Sephardic Jewish origins came to live in Brisbane from London just one year before the outbreak of the First World War. Displacement, therefore, is a central feature of Malouf's family history, and the young inquisitive Malouf got inspired by his grandfather who deserted his native land for fear of the horrible experiences unleashed by war. Malouf's literary curiosity is kindled, and he decides to unearth the history of Australia which is left unmapped and untold either consciously or unconsciously. As Nettlebeck in *Reading David Malouf* says:

We (Australians) have a history which beings in darkness; not in hope and light at all... But it is surprising how much despair, cruelty and suffering is really at the heart of the Australian experience. We keep rejecting that experience, it seems to me. May be we need fiction for that, too; to take us back again, to make us face

up to the suffering and the cruelty that we do not want to recognize at the center of our experience. (31-32)

The history of Australian war experience has provided him with the sufficient material for his war trilogy --- *Fly Away Peter*, *The Great World* and *Johnno*. While *Johnno* is a semi-autobiographical account of Malouf's life troubled by war, *Fly Away Peter* and *The Great World* echo the author's anti-war sentiments. Malouf's 1983 novel *Fly Away Peter* opens with description of the swampland "where a clumsy shape had been lifting itself out of an invisible paddock" (*FAP* 1) and which had been making "slow circuits of the air" over the peaceful swamp on Ashley Crowther's property at South Burleigh. The narrative of the novel unfolds itself through its protagonist Jim Saddler, an avid watcher of birds who works as a warden at the wildlife sanctuary located on the South coast of Queensland. It is on his return to Australia that Ashley Crowther, the inheritor of the vast estates including the quiet swampland meets Jim whose "knowledge of every blade of grass and drop of water in the swamp of every bird's foot that was set down there" (*FAP* 7) really impresses Ashley. It is pertinent to note that the entire narrative works itself through a juxtaposition of opposites, and is revealed in the opening pages of the novel itself. The initial atmosphere evoked in the opening pages is one of calm and serenity, but soon it gives place to one of confusion and gloom. Ashley Crowther, a little older than Jim, but educated at Cambridge, England appears as a "strange man with his waistcoat and watch-chain... in all ways cultivated" (*FAP* 9) while Jim is in his "worn moleskins and collarless shirt." (*FAP* 15) Ashley has inherited his land from his father and grandfather. After acquiring education in England, he comes back to take up his holding. Compared to Ashley, Jim, his worker, has a low social status. The differences between the two men lie not in the way Ashley treats him, but simply because of their social heritage — the way they dress, speak, the kind of cigarettes they smoke. Jim is treated as a human being, but the cultural differences between the two clearly set them apart. Despite the class differences Ashley respects Jim as much as any other man. The two young men are very content in that their relationship can support and that they enjoy each other's company and at all times. Here, through the friendship of Crowther and Jim, the novelist gets an opportunity to throw light on the postcolonial need for the peaceful co-existence of all categories of people, whether educated or uneducated, black or white and civilised or uncivilised.

As an innocent and self-made man, Jim is contented with his cocooned idyllic life in the sanctuary at South Queensland. In Jim Saddler's eyes, the swamp is a good representation of the

world, all the different types of birds representing cultures and nations around the world. The pristine virgin nature of the natural swampland is destroyed with the appearance of the bi-plane making awkward and noisy sounds. To Jim, the bi-plane is “a hundred times bigger than any hawk or eagle its appetite would be monstrous” (*FAP* 3). The plane represents a disturbance, something that lacks purpose, which could perhaps be war. The tree line could be something similar to the horizon, the Great War in Europe, just over the horizon from Australia. Malouf uses language to articulate how war progresses with “lack of pattern in its lumbering passes” and how it has a “lack of purpose” and uses several imagery techniques to make the scene more symbolic. Thus, at the outset of the novel itself, Malouf exposes the tension between natural and artificial Australia as is evident from Jim’s apprehensions about the changes taking place in Australia and the natural habitat in particular. The smooth life of Jim in the sanctuary divorced from the practical difficulties of war set in contrast with war-struck, confused Europe enables the novelist to point out the psychological truth that till the outbreak of the War, he has been living “in a dangerous state of innocence” (*FAP* 103). As for Ashley, the static natural landscape of South Burleigh appears to be in stark contrast to the changing urban Europe:

It was a landscape, Ashley thought, that could accommodate a good deal. That was his view of it. It wasn’t as clearly defined as England or Germany; new things could enter and find a place there. It might be old, even very old, but it was more open than Europe to what was still to come (*FAP* 15).

The physical and spiritual landscape of Queensland get transformed in Jim’s vision, for he soon finds himself in a world he had ever known or imagined. When Jim and Ashley set out to Europe to fight in the war, we are exposed to the grim realities of War and the harsh life the soldiers had to go through in the trenches, the rats, the smell and the dead bodies and sickness that were always around them. It describes water as being an enemy for the soldiers as the trenches were often flooded by it and the feet of the soldiers begin to rot standing in it for days on end. They had to live through the horrors of war and its most distinctive effects in the form of food shortage, disease, mistreatment and compulsory exhausting work. Jim’s journey from the peacefulness and openness of Australia to the busy and confined war front is marked by despair, disgust and disillusionment. Malouf describes the war front as a new landscape now newly developed for the promotion of War” (*FAP* 68) with “emergency roads,” “hosed wagons, guns,” “dumps for ammunition with guarded enclosures,” and the whole of Europe was “all in a state of

intense activity.”(FAP69) On the battle field, Jim experiences the stenchy nature of warfare and even finds that:

The real enemy, the one that challenged day and night and kept them permanently weary, was the stinking water that seeped endlessly out of the walls... Water was the real enemy, endlessly sweating from the walls and gleaming between the duck board –slats or falling steadily as rain... They fought the water that made their feet rot... They fought sleeplessness and the dull despair that came from that, and from their being, for the first time grimly unwashed, and having body lice that bred in the seams of their clothes... and rats in the same field-grey as the invisible enemy, that were. As big as cats and utterly fearless, skittering over your face in the dark, leaping out of knapsacks, darting in to take the very crusts from under your nose (FAP 82-83).

Life in the trenches is not easy for Jim, and as Jim notes in his diary while in the battlefield, he is surrounded by a world of bullets, machine-guns, rifles, wagons and mutilated and bloody bodies. Themes of muddiness, dirtiness and filth are evident as well as the lack of mobility or space that is present among the trenches. Instead of the larks in the sanctuary, the soldiers are scared by the sound of gunfire. The description of life in the trenches in Armentieres is based on Malouf's own personal visits to the battle fields where he investigated records of the War, and, in particular, the history of the forty-first Queensland battalion, a day-to-day account of the lives of men fighting in the trenches in France. While dealing with the extremities and the horrors of the war that Jim and Wizzer are involved in, Malouf uses a great deal of colourful and descriptive language, explaining in vivid detail the traumas and the hardship that is faced during war. A good example of this is near the beginning of the chapter: "Breathless, and still trembling, his head numb with the noise that was rolling all about, Jim scrambled to the lip of the crater, and seeing even in the dark that there was no glint of water, went over the edge and slid." (FAP 91)

The contrast in the soothing nature of the sanctuary and the disgusting trenches is highlighted when Jim remembers making a water tour of the sanctuary in the company of Ashley when he senses life even in water for there were creatures, so graceful: “turning their slow heads as the boat glided past and doubled where the water was clear: marsh terns spotted crake, spur-winged plover, Lewin water rails” (FAP32). In the natural environment, air and water are life-supporting mechanisms, but in the trenches, air and water are signifiers of death. In the trenches,

Jim confronts rats, but the ugly rats were “familiar of death, creatures of the underworld, as birds were of life and the air” (*FAP* 84).

Jim’s realises the meaninglessness of life and the absurdity of existence when he is coated by the blood of his friend Clancy. When Clancy embraces death, Jim understands that

Clancy had been blasted out of existence. It was Clancy’s blood that covered him and the strange slime that was all over him had nothing to do with being born into another life but was what had been scattered when Clancy was turned inside out (*FAP* 86).

Following Clancy’s death, Eric also dies slowly after having lost both his legs. The novel reaches its climax with the news of Jim’s death, but before his death, he has a visionary dream a ‘grand sweep’ where he saw it all, and himself a distant, slow moving figure within it: the long view of all their lives, including his own- all those who were running half-crouched, towards the guns... his own life neither more or less important than the rest even in his own vision of the thing, but unique because it was his head that contained it and in his view that all these balanced lives for a moment existed (*FAP* 123).

In this vision and in his death, Jim senses the wholeness of life and its continuing cycles, As Jim lies dying on the battlefield, he feels himself dissolving in to the earth, live the many soldiers who lost their lives before him. At the point of death, Jim understands his plight as he reconciles the cruelties and wasted lives of the war-experience with the innocence and simplicity offered by ordinary life. Jim faces life as it is, and develops a new and deeper understanding of the meaning of his own life, and life in general. He dies, but is triumphant.

The depth of exploration of the final chapter of the novel, the news of Jim’s death is conveyed by Imogen and “There was in there a mourning woman who rocked eternally back and forth; who would not be seen and was herself” (*FAP*142). On analyzing the senseless death of Jim, Imogene’s mind is preoccupied with the question of the meaning of life, and of an individual’s existence. She concludes thus: "A life wasn't for anything. It simply was." (*FAP*140). But now she sees something amazing in the distance. A surfer riding on the crest of the wave briefly and then falling down, and she feels that this cycle would repeat itself and Imogen found herself fascinated by this and realises the inevitability of change. She continues her grieving for Jim, but interested by the image of the surfer and "turned and looked again."

(FAP142) Imogene's overwhelming grief at Jim's death conveys the clear message that men created this experience, and also the reality of a war-ridden Europe.

In his *Writers in Politics: A Re-engagement with Issues of Literature and Society*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o observes that literature is a reflection of "actual men and women and children, breathing, eating, crying, laughing, creating, dying, growing, struggling, organizing, people in history of which they are its products, its producers and analysts." (67) As a socially-committed novelist, Malouf has turned the historical material of the First World War into real, lived experiences through his *Fly Away Peter*. Through this novel, Malouf points out that it is the lack of love, mutual trust and tolerance among human beings that creates situations leading to war. Ashley in the novel considers war as part of the technological and industrial development of the old world, and so observes that "War was being developed as a branch of industry. Later, what had been learned on the battlefield would travel back, and industry from now on, maybe all life, would be organised like war." (FAP142)

It is high time that we should learn lessons from the hardships and tormenting experiences of war, and so keeping in mind the heavy price paid by humanity, we should resist the possibilities of the outbreak of a war in the future. It can be said that Malouf's *Fly Away Peter* is an excellent critique of the social context of Australia during the turbulent times of the First World War, and by bringing out the links between good and bad, innocence and experience, life and death, he points out the philosophical truth that an individual gains an understanding about himself and the society at large as he experiences the opposing nature of life.

Works Cited

Malouf, David. *Fly Away Peter*. London: Vintage, 1999. Print.

Nettlebeck, Amanda. *Reading David Malouf*. Sydney: Sydney UP, 1995. Print.

Wa Thiong'o, Ngugi. *Writers in Politics: A Re-engagement with Issues of Literature and Society*. Nairobi: Heinemann, 1997. Print.